

On the Food Offering Prayer

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When we eat, instead of just wolfing down our meal, first we should say the food offering prayer.

Why is that? The prayer is an opportunity to recall our objects of refuge, to renew our vow of refuge, and to make offerings of our food and of mentally generated offerings, including whatever we wish to imagine. In this way, each meal is a chance to bring our minds back to our buddhist training and to accumulate merit. Since we eat several times a day, if we have the habit of saying the prayer with meals, then we will recall our refuge that many times throughout the day. And since the food itself is a ripening of our past merit, we offer it in order to ensure that we and all beings could have such good fortune again in the future.

The offering prayer begins with:

OM AH HUNG

These three syllables purify and bless the offering, our food, and multiply it to become vast clouds of offerings filling space. Conjure up images of whatever you think is most beautiful, pure, and pleasing to offer.

The prayer continues:

To the unsurpassed teacher, the precious buddha,

To the unsurpassed refuge, the precious holy dharma,

To the unsurpassed guide, the precious sangha,

This offering is made to the three supreme and rare jewels of refuge.

The buddha, dharma, and sangha are the three jewels. The buddha is the teacher who guides sentient beings. The dharma is the buddha's teaching, which is extremely vast; it has 84,000 categories for the sake of the many different kinds of beings to be led to enlightenment. The sangha is the community of followers who are trying to practice the buddha's teachings and achieve awakening. Since these three are our refuge and protection, we should constantly offer to them whatever we have, including our food and other possessions. This is one of the key trainings of the vow of refuge. Thus, imagine that the three jewels, countless in number filling space, receive your offering and are pleased.

Next, the prayer to Avalokiteshvara reads:

To the unstained Lord, whose body is white in color,

Whose head is adorned with a perfect buddha,

Who views living beings with the eyes of compassion,

To Avalokiteshvara I pray.

This section is a yidam, or "personal deity," practice, which means that we are generating ourselves as a buddha. Therefore, this short practice keeps the commitment of a Vajrayana practitioner to generate oneself as a deity every day. In this case, we generate ourselves as Avalokiteshvara, the Buddha of Compassion.

Avalokiteshvara (Tib. Chenrezig) is the embodiment of the three jewels, so although this prayer might seem to have a different focus than the previous offering prayer, it actually has the same essence. Avalokiteshvara is the embodiment of the body, speech, mind, qualities, and activities of many buddhas—countless billions of buddhas, in fact. The white color of Avalokiteshvara’s body indicates that he is not stained by any faults. If he had faults, he would be a different color. If he had faults, he would be like us.

We are the ones who have faults. We can’t see well with our two wisdom eyes because we have the two obscurations, namely the afflictive obscurations and the obscurations to omniscience, as well as many habit patterns. Therefore, we are born as sentient beings.

But you also are very lucky. You live in a time when the teacher Shakyamuni Buddha has spread the dharma. You are under the blessing and compassion of Guru Rinpoche as well. Through the inconceivable kindness of your mother and father, you have been able to obtain a precious human rebirth. You have met extraordinarily great masters who have taught many levels of dharma: not just the Hinayana but the Mahayana; not just the Mahayana but the Vajrayana, including Mahayoga, Anuyoga, and Atiyoga. But you don’t have to be a scholar. If you know the qualities of just one of the buddha’s hairs, you know the qualities of the buddha. However, if you know absolutely nothing about the qualities, then it’s difficult to make progress.

In contrast to ourselves, all the buddhas are free of faults. The word for “buddha” in Tibetan is “sangye.” “Sang” means “cleansed,” which indicates a buddha has no faults. “Gye” means blossomed, which indicates that a buddha has completely blossomed his positive qualities, which can be summed up in the two wisdoms: the wisdom which knows the nature of things and the wisdom which knows the extent of things.

The line, “Whose head is adorned with a perfect Buddha,” doesn’t mean that Avalokiteshvara is wearing a hat like we wear on our heads. He’s not like those ladies wearing hats but no pants. He doesn’t have ants in his pants either. Not like that! Avalokiteshvara has a perfect buddha at his crown, Buddha Amitabha, who is the principal buddha among all buddhas. Avalokiteshvara has not just one buddha but the five buddha families at his crown. They are his ornament.

What is Avalokiteshvara doing? Is he posing like a smart guy, rich guy, or handsome guy? No. Is he rich or poor, handsome or ugly, stupid or smart? Actually, he can be anything.

He can see all sentient beings’ suffering of birth and the source of that suffering. He can see the source of the suffering of sickness. He can see the sources of the sufferings of aging and death as well. He can see all suffering, and for the sake of beings, day and night, with not just one thousand arms and eyes but with countless arms and eyes, he works for their benefit. “Countless” means more than millions; it means there is no limit to his activity. And that is because sentient beings are limitless.

Avalokiteshvara sees beings; he is like every being’s father, mother, guru, and teacher. He “views living beings with the eyes of compassion.” Does this mean he can see one mile or two miles? It means he can see all sentient beings who pervade space – upwards, downwards, and everywhere. We are offering to him. We are offering our own activity of gathering merit and cleansing obscurations.

It is our own cleansing of obscurations and gathering of merit that will enable us to benefit beings. If we have no merit, there is no way we will be able to serve beings. If we have merit, we have the merit to benefit beings. If we cleanse our own obscurations, then we can tell the difference between others’ virtue and non-virtue, and we will not make mistakes when trying to help them.

Then, with the visualization of Avalokiteshvara, one recites the mantra:

OM MANI PADME HUNG

Whether or not we eat meat, we are constantly killing beings in our daily activities. Whenever we walk around or even just drink a glass of water, many beings are harmed. So we must pray for them. Cultivate compassion and pray for all the beings you have harmed and for all sentient beings. Also recall the kindness of the sponsor, if someone has given you the food.

The prayer concludes with the dedication:

*By the virtue of this practice, myself
Accomplishing swiftly the Lord Avalokiteshvara,
May all beings without exception
Be liberated to his level.*

That way, we dedicate the merit generated by this practice and make aspirations for all beings.

While we say the food offering prayer, instead of just looking at the food on our plate and thinking “delicious,” or “maybe it needs something else,” we should remember the three jewels and cultivate faith and compassion. We shouldn’t offer with a mind full of the eight worldly concerns. If we can seize that moment, just one moment of the day, and turn it toward virtue, we can really benefit ourselves.

Think carefully about this. Don’t waste your opportunity. I am saying all this but I don’t follow it. Therefore, I am crazy. It’s OK, because I am old, so nobody cares if I’m crazy. But you guys are young, so you need to be careful!

Tashi Deleg,

-Gyatral